

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release On Receipt (prepared 7/23/74)

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THREE HISTORIC PACIFIC ISLANDS BECOME WILDLIFE REFUGES

One of the Pacific islands quickly converted in 1937 to an airstrip for Amelia Earhart's ill-fated flight is among three recently set aside as National Wildlife Refuges for millions of seabirds, thousands of red hermit crabs, and as nesting sites for rare green sea turtles, the Department of the Interior announced today.

"The other two islands have colorful histories too," said Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Discovered by New Bedford whalers in the early 19th century, they were centers of guano digging disputes in the 1860's; colonized by Americans in the 1930's when radio and weather stations for air commerce were being established in the Pacific; and, finally, served as airstrips and weather stations during World War II."

The 400-acre Howland Island National Wildlife Refuge containing a beacon named after Amelia Earhart, the 340-acre Baker Island National Wildlife Refuge, and the 1,100-acre Jarvis Island National Wildlife Refuge, all located between 1,300 and 1,600 miles southwest of Honolulu, were officially designated as wildlife refuges in the Federal Register recently.

All three coral islands are uninhabited today and are covered 90 per cent by grasses, prostrate vines, and low shrubs because of scant rainfall, constant wind and sun. Porpoises are numerous in adjacent waters, some

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cats and rats are believed remaining on Jarvis Island, red hermit crabs and giant clams abound, and nearly two dozen sea and shore bird species, numbering in the millions, nest on the islands.

The three islands were administered by Interior's Office of Territorial Affairs but were turned over to Fish and Wildlife Service for restoration and preservation of the island ecosystems, which are of major importance to oceanic birds and to terrestrial and marine life. Debris from World War II will be cleaned up by the Fish and Wildlife Service. On Baker Island recolonization by seabirds is now occurring after biologists in 1964 eliminated the remaining cats introduced by troops during the war. Green sea turtles, which are on the list of "threatened" species, have been seen hauling onto the islands but it is not known if they nest there. The endangered hawksbill turtle occurs in the area, and it is possible this species nests on the islands.

The designation of the three National Wildlife Refuges will aid in preventing deleterious uses of the islands and provide legal protection to nesting seabird populations. All three refuges will be posted and inspected routinely. They will be administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service's Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge office. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists plan studies and surveys to collect baseline ecological data on the new refuges.

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